

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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ARE YOU GOOD AT SAYING "I'M SORRY?"

by Paul Anderson

Bill Clinton faced the nation after the Monica Lewinsky investigation. He said, "I misled people...I deeply regret that." Jimmy Swaggart admitted to "moral failure" after being involved with a prostitute. And Arnold Schwarzenegger, battling accusations along the political trail that he had groped women, responded, "Yes, I have behaved badly sometimes." Dan Rather spoke straightforwardly regarding the lack of CBS documentation used to report on the military service of President Bush. He confessed, "I want to say personally and directly, I'm sorry." Janet Jackson was less convincing after her 2004 Super Bowl halftime escapade: "I am really sorry if I offended anyone."

A Sorry Sorry!

Some sorry's lack impact. Jackson's "if" robs the confession of directness. "If" makes a confession hypothetical rather than concrete, safe rather than humble. You're not taking blame, not acknowledging that somewhere someone might be holding you accountable. "If" lands nowhere, so it is seldom owned—and does not belong anywhere near a confession.

Nor should an apology be an excuse, but too often it boils down to that: "I am in rehab...I'm going through a painful divorce...I was abused...I was having a bad day..." All you need after a tragic flaw that goes public is a half-hearted confession; then you can go ahead and write your book and appear on the Dave Letterman show. But that doesn't mean that the public buys in. Most people aren't that stupid. They can detect the difference between Rather and Jackson.

The root Greek word for apology actually adds to the confusion. "Apologia" means "to speak in defense." Apologetics is a reasoned defense of the Christian faith. But a true apology is anything but a defense; it is the absence of a defense. When we are given a confession that says, "I was wrong, but..."; we are not as inclined to forgive.

"I was wrong, but if you had called on time, I would not have been late."

"I am sorry, but this is the first time I have failed to pay the bill."

"I was at fault, but your words were unkind as well."

"I shouldn't have done it, but it wouldn't have happened if I had gotten a good night's sleep."

We would prefer giving people the benefit of the doubt rather than having them take it. It sounds more like an apologia than a heartfelt confession. We all tend to do it, because looking good feels better than looking bad. But people are more likely to give us grace if we give them truth. If, however, we lean toward the side of mercy, they look for justice.



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An Apology's afterglow

Don't expect your "sorry" to fix everything. We desire an easy resolution, wanting to forget the damage done. I was surprised that a pastor who was guilty of several affairs wanted his wife to "get over it" because he had.

Saying "I'm sorry" to your spouse doesn't come easy. Our ability to speak out those two humbling words will influence the ability of people to forgive us. Did the nation forgive Clinton? Many judged the confession as insincere, coming only after he was trapped in a lie. Swaggert's public tears looked like contrition, but didn't keep him from leaving his denomination when he was placed on a mandatory time of discipline and restoration. Dan Rather paid a price for his lack of judgment, stepping down as anchorman. And Janet Jackson's words might have landed, had she been able to say, "I know that I have offended many by my foolish behavior, and I am sorry." Caveats cheapen the value and dilute the impact of a confession.

Confessing failure is not the time to protect one's reputation, but we already feel on the defensive, so we may stay under cover. Expressions of regret don't have the power of a direct and humbling acknowledgment. Ronald Reagan said that "mistakes were made" during the Iran-contra scandal. And Bill Clinton spoke of "causing pain" as he looked back on his marriage while in the White House. The more we humble ourselves with truth that has the power to hurt us, the more we help the injured to forgive—and the more we will experience cleansing and healing. We include excuses so that we don't look as bad. The truth is—the worse we make ourselves appear, the easier it is for us to be forgiven and to walk away from the shame. The more we cover over our "mistakes," the less we experience God covering over them: *"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy"* (Prov. 28:13). "Love Story," the 1970 tearjerker included this unbelievable line: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." Say what? No one in his right mind believes that quotable line.

The recent tirade, in which Michael Richards, the comedian on "Seinfeld," called African Americans an extremely derogatory term, will require more than an apology. He *confessed*, "I am not a racist." Not quite enough. And Mel Gibson, likewise caught in an embarrassing moment spewing out anti-Jewish foment when stopped for drunk driving, will need to do more than say, "I am not an anti-Semite" to reconcile and repair. Jews think differently. When an apology sounds more like damage control, it lacks conviction.

"I'm sorry" is most effective when it occurs as close to the crime as possible. Alben W. Barkley, Harry S. Truman's Vice President, said, "If you have to eat crow, eat it while it's hot." The longer we wait, the more pain our words or actions potentially cause. It took Haggard three days to finally say, "I am a liar and deceiver," when the truth of his affair was breaking. He was running for cover until he realized that he had nowhere to hide. And the world knew it!

Some Q & A

Why is it so hard to say, "I'm sorry"? We already feel insecure. Admitting failure seems to take us even lower. We know we're not doing things right, and yet some of us desperately need approval. We fear that people will think less of us. In fact, John says that *"if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another..."* (1 John 1:7). And yet we have seen defensive tactics modeled. We have watched leaders hide behind excuses and self-righteousness. Furthermore, Satan tricks us into thinking that honesty will mean separation from friends. We fear isolation, but we receive stronger relationships when we're honest. Vulnerability gives others the permission to share their struggles and failures.

IF WE WALK IN THE LIGHT as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...

1 John 1:7

in cases like Haggard's. For Bill Clinton, it could have meant impeachment. For Arnold, it could have cost him the governorship of California. For Dan, it meant stepping down. But paying the price of truth allows us to live with the person inside of us: *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"* (1 John 1:8). To be self-deceived means living in bondage. Far better to lose a position and save our self-awareness.

I have noticed that my children want to say a simple, "I'm sorry," even when it demands amplification. The humble say more, not less: "I was wrong in the way I spoke with you. I am sure that it hurt. Will you forgive me?" That is going low rather than expecting the offended party to meet you half-way. When the offender



makes too small a deal out of something major, the offended party is less inclined to issue forgiveness. Listen to the humility of the prodigal son: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men”* (Luke 15:19). What makes this a strong confession is that the prodigal left home, claiming his inheritance as a son. Upon returning, he was willing to take the role of a servant rather than a son.

What happens when we hold back from the full

truth? We inhibit fellowship. Vulnerability releases grace, while the hypocritical show of being all right separates us from others. Perfectionism, the appearance of being right, spreads a dangerous virus in the Christian community and keeps us in a place of deception. The irony is that we think we are fooling others. When we model this kind of pride with co-workers or family members, trust is reduced, because people know our faults, even if we don't.

What happens when we come clean with a full confession? Grace is released—nothing like transparency to level the playing floor. Our example encourages an atmosphere of confession. Courage follows honest repentance. God uses failure in our lives. Where sin has abounded, grace much more abounds—if we embrace the truth.

Other questions to consider:

What impact does confession have on our future? Does an honest confession ever ruin our future? What if some people are unable to forgive us? Why is confession important for relationships? Are there times when a full confession is inappropriate? Who must we confess to? Whom should we not confess to? In other words, how wide a circle should we draw when confessing? Have you ever been damaged by someone's confession? Why? What does that teach you? Have you ever regretted not being truthful about a failure? Were you able to turn it around?

How do you know when you have made a complete confession?

- When you are not continuing to argue in your mind.
- When you are not wishing ill for the person you have offended.
- When thinking about the person does not bring pain but thankfulness.
- When you don't defend yourself regarding the action.
- When self-condemnation is fully replaced by cleansing.

Confessing is not giving a reason for why we messed up, implicating others in the crime, expressing sadness at what happened, or acknowledging that something should have been done differently. Confessing means taking full responsibility for what I have done without excuse, alibi or explanation. It is inappropriate to lighten the seriousness of our offense by lengthy explanations.

Having said all this, we are not looking primarily for the right words but rather for the right heart. We can fake a confession, but God reads what simmers inside. I've heard enough perfunctory apologies from my kids to realize that I must have pulled off the same shallow acknowledgments myself. I don't want to hear any more drones of "I'm sorry," with a good Christian ring but with the sincerity of a stand-up comic. One of my kids thinks that well-chosen words erase history: "Well, I said I was sorry." We're not teaching a technique here, as if to say to Jackson, "Drop the 'if' and you're clear." We don't change the past by correcting the syntax. Jesus revealed that out of the heart, not out of the mouth, *"come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."* (Matt. 15:19). A proper confession won't

change a heart, but hopefully it reflects the heart.

Don't just say, "Sorry." Include what you did, how it impacted the other person, and how you are going to change. Otherwise, you are not humbling yourself; you're playing it safe and hoping the blame goes away.

...WHOEVER CONFESSES and renounces (their sins) finds mercy

Proverbs 28:13

Dear Friend:

Do you come clean when you have compromised your faith, lived as a poor example to others, exaggerated for the sake of making yourself look good? Do sins hang on in your life because you are not brutal enough with them? Are you too easy on your sinful nature? Do you coddle it when you are called to crucify it? Do you come forward with the truth before you are caught? May we receive sufficient grace from a merciful God that we walk in the truth.



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With Wolfgang Simson, Germany

April 20-21, 2007

North Heights Lutheran Church
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April 20: 1:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

April 21: 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

The 10 Key Elements of **LUKETEN**



Wolfgang Simson, our dear brother from Germany, functions as an international strategy consultant and speaker. Through his research on growing churches, church planting movements, and revival and mission breakthroughs, he focuses on issues of completing the Great Commission by discipling nations through multiplying churches. He is on the apostolic team of Kingdom Ministries, a team that works in seven countries or people groups. His website: www.simsonwolfgang.de.



LUKETEN Registration

Friday, April 20 • 1:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Saturday, April 21 • 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Please note: The seminar will be held at
North Heights Lutheran Church
2701 Rice Street • Roseville MN 55113

You may make copies of this form to share with others.

One family per form, please.

No food will be sold on-site. We will supply a list of area restaurants upon your arrival.

Cost: \$35 per person if postmarked before April 12
\$40 per person if postmarked after April 12
or if registering on-site

The cost remains the same whether you attend one or all of the sessions.

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Name(s) _____
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We regret that no children under the age of 12 years will be admitted to this seminar. Exception: nursing infants. Sorry, childcare is not available.

Seminar Payments

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How to register:

1. Regular mail: Send your form with check payable to Lutheran Renewal; 2701 Rice Street; St. Paul, MN 55113
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3. On-site welcome, but dependent on seat availability

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